DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 029 010 TE 000 356

By-Hillerich, Robert L.

A Spelling/Writing Project Becomes an English Program.

Glenview Public Schools, Ill.
Pub Date [67]
Note-8p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.50
Descriptors-Composition (Literary), *Composition Skills (Literary), Elementary Education, English Instruction, *English Programs, Language Skills, Linguistics, Phonology, Pretesting, Spelling, *Spelling Instruction, Study Skills, Vocabulary Development, Word Frequency, Word Lists, *Writing

An experimental program was initiated into the Glenview (Illinois) Public Schools in 1964 to help elementary students learn to spell correctly and to write fluently. The spelling approach was based on the assumptions that students learn correct spelling best from a word list, that an initial test identifies normally misspelled words, and that students should master first the spelling of words used most frequently in their writing. A list of words to be taught was prepared from the written vocabulary of Glenview children in grades 2-6. Establishment of this spelling program led to the development of a total English program in which spelling was placed in its proper "frame of reference as one aspect of revision and proofreading." This program emphasizes written expression and encompasses six major areas at each elementary grade: language development, syntax, study skills, composition (various types of writing), mechanics, and spelling. (MM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED029010

A SPELLING/WRITING PROJECT BECOMES AN ENGLISH PROGRAM

Robert L. Hillerich

Few areas of the elementary school curriculum receive more comment with less result than does the teaching of spelling. In the Glenview Schools we were determined to follow discussion with action, but our concern was a dual one. We wanted children to learn to spell correctly rather than phonetically, but more so we wanted them to become more fluent in written language. Our children, as we saw them year after year, were above average in ability, could talk on many subjects easily, read well, misspelled phonetically, and generally resisted the discipline of putting their thoughts on paper.

Research has pretty thoroughly undermined the typical commercial approach to spelling. For example, it appears that correctness in spelling is as much a matter of attitude and interest as it is a skill. Goss (1) found that children actually knew how to spell fifty percent of the words they misspelled in their written compositions. The assumed reason for the misspelling of half of these words must relate to attitudes--the children were careless, in a hurry, or did not go back to proofread what they had written.

What are we doing in our schools to further the proper attitude that is so necessary if we expect children to be correct spellers? Are we developing this attitude by putting children through the typical five-day-a-week spelling program? Are we fostering this attitude by having children study lists of words, seventy-five percent of which they know before they have begun to study them? Are we fostering this attitude, or even developing any skill in spelling, by having children fill in contextual blanks, study rules about spelling, or do phonic exercises to practice these rules?

TE 000 256

Research and experience would suggest that we are wasting much of children's time in these activities that are included in a typical spelling program. As stated by Horn (2) and many others, we should spend no more than one hour per week on spelling. We can do this if we eliminate many of the time-wasting activities that are so prevalent. For example, time is saved and spelling is taught more effectively if words are presented in list form rather than in context (2, 3).

One of the most agreed upon findings of research is the value of a pretest (2, 3, 4). A pretest with immediate correction by the child will determine which words can be eliminated and which words need to be studied. While the teacher's stressing of hard spots in words is of no value to children--because each child has his own hard spot--the immediate correction of a pretest will help each youngster to identify his own personal hard spots in words, the points on which he needs to put emphasis.

Commercial spelling programs do take advantage of a few points indicated by the research. They usually provide some means whereby the child can keep a record of his progress in spelling. They do emphasize, or at least provide for emphasis of the study method in spelling, and this in turn usually calls for attention to visual imagery and visual discrimination, both of which have been found to be important factors in learning to spell. Further than that, as pointed out in a summary of the research by Dorothy Bredin (5), traditional spelling programs are not justified and have little foundation in research findings.

A basic tenet of most commercial programs is that a generalization approach, that is, a building of spelling power, is an important method in teaching spelling. Yet the research suggests the reverse: children learn to spell the words that they study specifically for spelling (6). In fact, in the computer study done at Stanford, Paul Hanna (7) reported that, while

eighty-four percent of the 17,000 words examined were consistently spelled when they were put into the computer phoneme by phoneme, the same 17,000 words were only forty-nine percent consistent when they were analyzed as whole words. When we consider that children must spell whole words correctly or incorrectly and that the computer was programmed for many, many more rules than any child can be programmed for, even the forty-nine percent is probably an exaggerated estimate of our ability to teach children to spell correctly through rules.

What has been said thus far and what is implied by the research is that spelling can probably best be taught strictly from a word list with a pretest for each week's words before the children begin studying. This pretest, with immediate correction by the child, should be followed by review of the study method as needed and by application of the study method to the words that were missed on the pretest. A retest on Wednesday of the words missed and a retest on Friday could comprise the entire spelling program.

Such an approach was piloted in the Glenview Schools in 1964, using experimental and control groups with a pre- and post-test design. Results indicated that children in the experimental program scored as well on the test of studied words as did children in the control group who used a commercial program, and that children in the experimental program scored significantly better on unstudied words, despite the fact that the control group supposedly was building spelling power. The experimental group was studying twice as many words per week as the control group but was devoting only three days a week to spelling, as compared with the five days a week given to spelling in the commercial program.

What happened in the two periods each week that were stolen from the traditional spelling program? This probably is the crucial point in the

entire program. Those two periods were devoted to additional experiences in written language: writing, revising, and the teaching of proofreading skills. Teachers reported a great increase in interest in spelling correctly. What with the crowded school day, children were able to do at least twice as much in the way of written language as they had done in the past because of the two added periods. Such an approach puts spelling into proper perspective. There is no point in learning to spell orally, and there is no point in learning to spell words that one is not going to use in his writing.

This truism leads us, however, to a problem. What words should children study in spelling if we take a word list approach? The obvious answer would be the words that they will use in writing. A priority should be placed on the most-frequently used words being taught first, but where does one find such a list? Commercial spellers are of no value as a source for words to be taught. Wise (8) compared twenty spelling programs and found very little agreement as to words taught or the grade level at which these words should be taught. In a comparison of sixteen commercial spelling programs from second through sixth grade, Hillerich (9) found only 486 words common to the sixteen programs, even when grade placement was ignored. Considering grade level placement, only forty words were agreed upon by the sixteen programs and these words were all in second grade. Not only that, some very peculiar placements of words arose: for example, the words with and out were unanimously placed at grade two, but the compound without ranged from grade two to grade five; twenty-nine words spanned the grades, from two to six. While an average of 2,167 words was taught by sixth grade, a total of 5,327 words was included in the sixteen programs.

With so little agreement among commercial spelling books, one might go to the basic word lists such as Thorndike or Rinsland. Here, however, problems

arise in that the word lists are very badly dated.

In order to develop a current word list, the Glenview Schools, in 1966, engaged in a frequency count involving over a third of a million running words from children's creative writing in grades two through six. That word list is being used as part of the spelling program described above. Teachers, during the school year 1966-1967, kept a tally of words missed by children so that an estimate of the difficulty of each word could be established. The word lists are now balanced in terms of difficulty as well as frequency.

An interesting sidelight of the word count is the additional evidence it offers that existing word lists are certainly outdated. For example, we found that Fitzgerald's 2,650 word spelling vocabulary (10) has many words that are not used at all by children today. Twenty-five percent of Horn's First Hundred words were not among the first hundred most frequently used by Glenview children.

A somewhat shocking discovery came from this study of the words used by children in grades two through six in their written language: only 10,446 different words were used throughout the grades in this third of a million words. When derivatives of basic words were eliminated, the number of different root words was less than 6,000. When one considers that Rinsland (11) reported 11,304 different words used at sixth grade in 1937, a questions arises. This question again is related to children's attitudes toward spelling. Are we, in our emphasis on correct spelling, leading children to use more basic--and often less appropriate--words in their writing merely because these are the words they know how to spell? Can we get spelling back into proper perspective by putting our emphasis on the expression of thoughts, on the communication of ideas in writing in the clearest and most interesting manner possible? To do this, we must place spelling, along with the various mechanics of punctua-

tion and capitalization, in the proper frame of reference as one aspect of revision and proofreading.

Once the teaching of spelling was established in our schools, the desire to improve written language--far stronger than any concern about spelling per se--motivated the staff to further exploration. An in-service program in linguistics (12) led to a review of current English texts. While several of the new texts represented a fresh and more honest approach to grammar, none had the emphasis on written expression that we sought.

In the summer of 1967, six staff members, hired from local funds, expanded the original "Spelling/Writing Project" into a total English program. Two early decisions were fundamental to the entire program. First, we wanted children to operate as linguists, using their knowledge of the spoken language to analyze and study the language as it exists; we did not want to take the findings of linguists and teach them as rules to the children. Secondly, emphasis was to be on improving the method of teaching those items normally considered important in an English program; we did not want to change terminology or content merely for the sake of change.

The program, as developed and in use this year, encompasses six major areas at each grade level. Language development, the first area, includes the study of phonology--exploration of sounds and how they are formed and represented, a part of the original spelling/writing project--as well as some vocabulary development and historical background.

The second topic at each grade level is syntax, including sentence patterns and parts of speech. While traditional grade placement and most terminology were retained, the teaching of parts of speech as a labeling process has been discarded and every activity relates to improving use of the language. For example, at no point are worksheets suggested or provided: children practice and apply skills in their own writing.

Study skills, the third area, is probably the least different from traditional approaches. It provides for teaching the use of various reference materials and for the development of skill in outlining.

While composition is a part of the entire program, separate lessons are also taught on the various types of writing. Units in this fourth area encompass everything from simple description to haiku, including propaganda analysis. A major feature of this section is the viewpoint toward written composition, that children be concerned first with clarity, then with interest to the reader, and only finally with correctness.

The section on mechanics includes a typical catalog of those items to be taught and a sample lesson for teaching them.

The final section is devoted to the spelling program and provides an outline of the philosophy, directions for conducting the program, and graded word lists.

While the program is considered tentative and will be improved for next year, it has been received unusually well by the entire staff. Several accomplishments are already observable: spelling has been placed in proper perspective along with the other items of "correctness"; all roads lead to writing; and, best of all, children are discovering that English is fun!

REFERENCES

1. Goss, James, "Analysis of Accuracy of Spelling in Written Compositions of Elementary School Children and the Effects of Proofreading Emphasis Upon Accuracy," Ed.D. dissertation, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1959.

2. Horn, Ernest, "Spelling," Encyclopedia of Educational Research, New York: Macmillan, 1960.

3. Horn, Thomas D., "Research in Spelling," Elementary English, March, 1960, 174-177.

4. Horn, Thomas D., "The Effect of the Corrected Test on Learning to Spell," Elementary School Journal, January, 1947, 277-285.

5. Bredin, Dorothy M., "Is the Present Typical Commercial Approach to Spelling in Grades Two Through Six Justified by Research"?, Master's Paper, Evanston: National College, March, 1966.

6. Petty, Walter, "Phonetic Elements as Factors in Spelling Difficulties," Journal of Educational Research, November, 1957, 209-214.

7. Hanna, Paul, et al, Phoneme-Grapheme Correspondences as Cues to Spelling Improvement, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966.

8. Wise, Carl T., "Selection and Gradation of Words in Spelling," Elementary School Journal, June, 1934, 754-766.

9. Hillerich, Robert L., "A Comparison of Word Lists in Sixteen Commercial Spelling Programs," unpublished study, 1965.

10. Fitzgerald, James A., A Basic Life Spelling Vocabulary, Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1951.

11. Rinsland, Henry D., A Basic Vocabulary of Elementary School Children, New York: Macmillan, 1945.

12. Bostain, James C., "English--Fact and Fancy.", Bloomington: National Center for School and College Television, 1964, (film series).